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ABSTRACT

This paper examines coercive egalitarianism as it relates specifically to gifted education. Deliberate underachievement is seen to result from this egalitarianism which has arisen as a result of overriding concerns with creating equity among students. Additionally, envy by other students results in their attempting to compromise those advantages and successes. Studies are reviewed which illustrate a continuum of coercion, showing that both teachers and students prefer athletic and nonstudious students and that gifted students will go to great lengths to avoid the "brain-nerd connection." Suggestions are offered for combatting this problem at the individual student level, at the school level, and at the school district level. The importance of improving conditions for disadvantaged students is also stressed. (Contains 11 references.) (DB)

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An Examination of Coercive Egalitarianism: Peer, Institutional, and Cultural Sanctions Against the Achieving Gifted Child

A Paper Prepared for the Minnesota Council for the Gifted and Talented

By MCGT President Stephen Schroeder-Davis

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Coercive Egalitarianism: Subverting Achievement Through Neglect and Hostility

> Creative persons have always met with opposition. Columbus was scorned for thinking the world was round. Everyone laughed at the Wright brothers for believing men could fly. It seems to be the lot of innovators in all fields to endure opposition, apathy, and even hate.
>
> - Torrance, 1963

> Throughout the centuries there were men who took first steps down new roads armed with nothing but their own vision. Their goals differed but they all had this in common: that the step was first, the road new, the vision unborrowed, and the response they received- hatred. The great creators- the thinkers, the artists, the scientists, the inventors- stood alone against the men of their time. Every great new thought was opposed. Every great new invention was denounced. The first motor was considered foolish. The airplane was considered impossible. The power loom was considered vicious. Anesthesia was considered sinful. But the men of unborrowed vision went ahead. They fought, they suffered and they paid. But they won.
>
> - Rand, 1947

> Almost every phase of life activity today is in dire need of creative people- people with vision, people with originality and initiative. This does not mean that new ideas are generally welcomed; many of the greatest ideas have been at least temporarily spurned and their initiators dishonored. *Such people are important, however, to the very survival of the human race.* [emphasis added]
>
> - Torrance, 1963

Although the writers cited above were referring specifically to creativity, coercive egalitarianism, which I define as, "Forced equalization through neglect and/or compulsion" is proliferating in all areas of giftedness and in all fields of endeavor.

There are, in essence, concentric circles of coercive egalitarianism, beginning with our national obsession with equality and compensatory programming and culminating in the typical American school where, ironically, reside the most virulent anti-intellectual, anti-achievement (non) values of any institution in the nation.

This article will examine coercive egalitarianism as it relates specifically to gifted education and will suggest ways of combating this phenomena in schools and at home.

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An Historical Perspective

Anti-Intellectualism in American Life **(Hofstadter, 1964) is perhaps the most thorough examination available regarding resentment of intelligence. Hofstadter, who was awarded Pulitzer prizes in 1956 and 1964, details this phenomena in great depth. His comments on American education, now almost three decades old, are particularly relevant today:**

> **But if we turn from the rhetoric of the past to the realities of the present, we are most struck by the volume of criticism suggesting that something very important has been missing from the American passion for education. A host of educational problems has arisen from indifference- underpaid teachers, over-crowded classrooms, double-schedule schools, broken-down school buildings, inadequate facilities and a number of other failings that come from something else- the cult of athleticism, marching bands, high-school drum majorettes, ethnic ghetto schools, de-intellectualized curricula, the failure to educate in serious subjects, the neglect of academically gifted children. At times, the schools of the country seem to be dominated by athletics, commercialism, and the standards of the mass media, and these extend upwards to a system of higher education whose worst failings were underlined by the bold president of the University of Oklahoma who hoped to develop a university of which the football team could be proud.**
>
> **- Hofstadter, 1964**

This indictment, written during the "post-sputnik" era, reflects Hofstadter's frustration with (gifted) education during what was arguably its zenith. Things have degenerated for much of the past quarter century, especially for those with outstanding abilities.

Writing for the ***Atlantic Monthly*** **(November, 1991) Daniel J. Singal examines two crises in education. The crisis receiving the most attention, that of disadvantaged students performing poorly in school, has recently shown improvement, reflected by slow but steady gains in this group's standardized test scores since the 1960's. Alarmingly, despite these gains,** ***overall*** **"test scores have nonetheless gone down,** ***primarily because of the performance of those in the top quartile"*** **(emphasis added). Singal considers this trend to be the "other crisis."**

Singal quotes Herman Rudman, educational psychologist and an author of the Stanford Achievement Test for the past thirty years: "This highest cohort of achievers has shown the greatest decline across a variety of subjects as well as across age-level groups."

Quoting Singal again, "In other words, our brightest youngsters, those most likely to be headed for selective colleges, have suffered the most dramatic setbacks over the past two decades..." Needless to say, this includes much of America's gifted population.

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Singal then reviewed *Barron's Profile's of American Colleges*, concentrating on those with the most rigorous entrance standards, and found the following pattern beginning in 1972 (the year SAT changed its reporting system): the percentage of incoming freshman scoring over 600 (out of a possible 800) on the verbal portion of the test declined more than 40% *in just eleven years*; from 11.4% in 1972 to 6.9% in 1983. Despite modest gains in the mid 1980's, scores have remained about the same since. Singal hypothesizes that an graduating senior headed for one of these colleges "would come in roughly fifty to sixty points lower on the verbal section and twenty-five points lower on the math than he or she would have in 1970." These elite schools, such as Columbia, Swarthmore and the University of Chicago have *not* slipped in rank or become less competitive. Further, the SAT has remained constant, calibrated over time to yield a standard score.

The cause appears to be simply that incoming freshman are not as prepared, competent, or motivated as they were twenty years ago. In Singal's words, "...perusing a twenty-year-old edition of *Barron's* is an experience equivalent to entering a different world, with tuitions much lower and SAT scores much higher than at most schools today."

As a secondary teacher and coordinator of gifted services, my primary concern is *why* our students (not just seniors, although they are the most visible) are so woefully ill-equipped for collegiate study.

I believe the fundamental cause is coercive egalitarianism, specifically a burgeoning hostility toward *applied* ability which has reached suffocating proportions among adolescents. The result is a population of deliberate underachievers unparalleled in our nation's history.

Whether this is a venomous departure from - or perhaps the ultimate consequence of - the ambivalence that has existed toward the gifted for so long is open to question. This "ambivalence" has been well documented by dozens of writers and researchers. The primary reason usually offered is the supposed democratic tension invariably described with the mantra "equity vs. excellence", but I am convinced something much more insidious is occurring, the effects of which are just now emerging.

Here is how Singal frames the problem:

> Two crises are stalking American education. Each poses a major threat to the nation's future. The two are very different in character and will require separate strategies if we wish to solve them; yet to date, almost without exception, those concerned with restoring excellence to our schools have lumped them together.
>
> The first crisis, which centers on disadvantaged minority children attending inner-city schools, has received considerable attention, as well it should. Put simply, it involves students whose habitats makes it very difficult for them to learn. The key issues are more social than educational. These children clearly need dedicated teachers and a sound curriculum, the two staples of a quality school, but the fact remains that most of them will not make significant progress until they also have decent housing, a better diet, and a safer environment in which to live.

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> The second crisis, in contrast, is far more academic than social and to a suprising extent, invisible. It involves approximately half the country's student population- the group that educators refer to as "college-bound."

I have only one quarrel with his argument, but it is crucial to my thesis: I don't believe the two crises have been "lumped together" or that they are "in contrast." Rather, to a large degree, I believe the first crisis, and our responses to it, have *caused* the second.

Specifically, our overriding concern with creating (coercing) equity has resulted in calls for the elimination of ability grouping, the pervasiveness of mainstreaming, and funding formulas that rarely acknowledge the existence of the gifted. These policies have, in turn, contributed to a corrosive, oppositional climate in our schools because they force two polarized groups with antithetical value systems to "live" in close proximity to one another each school day. These two groups are the achievers - who believe in the value of academic effort - and the nonachievers - who, for a variety of reasons, do not.

Among the more hostile of the nonachievers, the "ambivalence" toward the gifted implied in the insipid "equity vs. excellence" argument quickly degenerates into a precipitous slide past jealousy into what Hofstadter described as "an atmosphere of fervent malice and humorless imbicility" aimed at the (gifted) achiever. In a word, envy.

Envy Defined and Examined

Envy may be defined as "a feeling of discontent or covetousness with regard to another's advantages, success, possessions, etc." (The Random House Dictionary, 1987).

This definition only partly elucidates the envious individual's complex psychology and motivations. Ayn Rand wrote chillingly and prophetically of this phenomena in an article entitled "The Age of Envy" (1971). She begins by explaining that, although never admirable, envy exists on a continuum from the relatively innocent to the abjectly evil. Referring to the most injurious variety, she states:

> This is particularly clear in the much more virulent cases of hatred, masked as envy, for those who possess personal values or virtues: hatred for a man (or a woman) because he (she) is beautiful or intelligent or successful or happy. In these cases, the creature has no desire and makes no effort to improve its appearance, to develop or use its intelligence, to struggle for success, to practice honesty, to be happy (nothing can make it happy). It knows that the disfigurement or the mental collapse or the failure or the immorality or the misery of its victim would not endow it with his or her value. It does not desire the value: it desires the value's destruction.

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An entire book, *Envy: A Theory of Social Behaviour* by Helmut Schoeck (1969) addresses this issue. Schoeck quotes a vivid description offered by William L. Davidson in 1912 (emphasis added):

> Envy is an emotion that is essentially both selfish and malevolent. It is aimed at persons, and implies dislike of one who possesses what the envious man himself covets or desires, and a wish to harm him. Grasping-ness for self and ill-will lie at the basis of it. There is in it also a consciousness of inferiority to the person envied and a chafing under this consciousness. He who has got what I envy is felt by me to have the advantage of me, and I resent it. Consequently, I rejoice if he finds *that his envied possession does not give him entire satisfaction- much more, if it actually entails on him dissatisfaction and pain*: that simply reduces his superiority in my eyes, and ministers to my feelings of self-importance.

How do envious classmates of gifted students see to it that, "the envied possession does not give entire satisfaction" and "...entails dissatisfaction and pain..."? By punishing the pursuit of excellence through isolation, prejudice, teasing, stereotyping, alienation, and, if all else fails, intimidation and physical violence.

The operational definition of envy then, might be as follows: "A feeling of discontent or covetousness at the sight of another's advantages or successes which becomes so intense, attempts are made to compromise those advantages or successes."

A Continuum of Coercion

How is envy manifested in schools? Studies and articles reveal a "continuum of coercion" from the relatively benign to the almost incomprehensibly violent.

The Torrance Study

In a sixth grade classroom, pioneering researcher E. Paul Torrance (1962) assigned students identified as "high creatives" and four less creative age-peers to work in groups of five to solve a demanding task. A reward would result upon successful task completion. In his observational summary he reported the following behaviors aimed at the high creatives by their less creative peers:

> Techniques of control include open aggression and hostility, criticism, rejection and/or indifference, the use of organizational machinery to limit scope of operations, and exaltation to a position of power involving paper work and administrative responsibility.

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The Tannenbaum Study

In a questionnaire administered to high school juniors, Abraham Tannenbaum (1963), asked students to rank the following six personality characteristics: brilliant-average X studious-nonstudious X athletic-nonathletic. He then conducted a three way analysis of variance designed to assess respondents' views of the most desirable "hypothetical" peer. The preferred trait combination was the "brilliant -nonstudious-athlete" as contrasted to the social parish possessing the least desirable trait combination, the "brilliant-studious-nonathlete," commonly considered the negative stereotype of the gifted child.

A Follow-Up to Tannenbaum

In an attempt to determine teacher attitudes toward athleticism, studiousness, and brilliance, researchers Cramond and Martin (1987) repeated the Tannenbaum study with 100 teachers-in-training enrolled in an undergraduate psychology course. Incredibly, the responses to the six stimulus characters describing the "hypothetical student" were virtually identical. As with the original study, "athleticism" was valued most highly. In both studies, the athlete occupies the top four of eight possible combinations, the non-athlete the bottom four. In both studies, the "brilliant-studious-nonathletic" character was the least desired. The authors conclude that "brilliance" is simply not a determining factor relative to desirability. Rather, it is where the brilliance is "housed," i.e., in an athlete, and preferably a nonstudious one, that seems to make the difference.

The authors then repeated the study, this time with 82 teachers (maximum years of experience: 21) and found virtually the same results! Again, the "athletic" character occupied the top four positions; the "nonathletic" the bottom four. Both preservice and experienced teachers found the "average-nonstudious-athletic" character the most desirable and the "brilliant-studious-nonathletic" the least.

Of the three studies, only one group - the juniors in the original study - ranked "brilliance" as the preferred trait, and then only when grouped with "nonstudiousness" and "athletic." Both preservice and experienced teachers preferred "average" to "brilliant" as a character descriptor (ouch!).

Finally, all three studies found the "athlete" occupying the top four positions while the "nonathlete" occupied the bottom four.

At the risk of further depressing readers of this newsletter, here are the three studies together:

1) The "Brilliant - Studious - Nonathlete" was chosen last in all three surveys.

2) "Athlete" occupies the top four places in all three surveys (in other words, the top 12 of 24 positions).

3) "Nonstudious" occupies the top spot in all three surveys.

4) Preservice and practicing teachers chose "Average" over "Brilliant" as a descriptor.

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Academic Achievement and Social Acceptance

A more recent study reaffirms those cited above. Using interviews and questionnaires with a sample drawn from 8,000 California and Wisconsin high school students, authors Brown and Steinberg (1990) sought to examine what they label the "brain-nerd connection." Specifically, they wanted to explore how "noninstructional" considerations affect achievement. Briefly, here are their findings:

1) There are, in fact, a variety of "peer groups" (cliques) in virtually all schools.

2) Students associate "brains" with "nerds."

3) High achievers resist being labeled a brain and consequently;

4) High achievers employ strategies to avoid the "brain-nerd connection."

The strategies employed were:

1) Denial

2) Distraction (displaying excellence in another realm, preferably athletics)

3) Deviance (the "class clown")

4) Underachievement

From Passive Coercion to Physical Violence

Thus far, student-to-student coercive methods have been cruel, but relatively passive, consisting largely of isolation, teasing, and the like. One wonders how the situation could get worse - until one encounters "The Hidden Hurdle," an article that appeared in the March 16, 1992 Time.

This article traces the persecution of Za'kettha Blaylock, who is surely representative of thousands of (black, urban) teens trying desperately to achieve despite physical abuse and death threats from gangs who "specialize in terrorizing bright black students."

Author Sophronia Scott Gregory points out that "'acting white' has often been the insult of choice used by blacks who stayed behind against those who moved forward." She observes, "The pattern of abuse is a distinctive variation of the nerd bashing that almost all bright, ambitious students - no matter what their color - face at some point in their young lives."

Rachel Bates, one of the 8th graders interviewed for the article offers a perfect description of coercive egalitarianism: "Instead of trying to come up with the smart kids, they try to bring you down to their level. They don't realize that if you don't have an education, you won't have anything - no job, no husband, no home."

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Recall the operational definition of envy offered earlier: " A feeling of discontent or covetousness with regard to another's advantages or successes which becomes so intense, attempts are made to compromise those advantages or successes ."

It is vital to note that those that envy are <u>not</u> merely "indifferent" or even ambivalent toward (gifted) achievers. If this were the case, they would ignore, rather than persecute them. Nor are the envious inspired to follow the achievers' heroic example and emulate their efforts - if this were the case, they would seek their help rather than threaten to destroy them. Those that envy are also not practicing an "alternative value system" as is sometimes claimed - they are, in fact, pursuing a <u>non-value</u>, that of destruction, and worse; the destruction of values, effort, and achievement that are not theirs to challenge or destroy.

<u>Combating the Problem</u>

Clearly, this is a problem that transcends "school climate" and the relatively meager resources an individual student, parent, or school district can muster. However, there <u>are</u> strategies available on every level to combat the coercively envious, and the remainder of this article will explore each of these.

An article by Miraca M. Gross (1989) summarizes the problem faced by gifted individuals :

> A dilemma peculiar to gifted youth arises through the interaction of the psychosocial drives toward intimacy and achievement, which complement each other in students of average ability, but which place the gifted student in a forced-choice situation. If the gifted child chooses to satisfy the drive for excellence, he or she must risk forfeiting the attainment of intimacy with age peers; if the choice is intimacy, the gifted may be forced into a pattern of systematic and deliberate underachievement to retain membership in the social group.

Now, recall the Torrance study quoted earlier regarding the sixth-grade students who attempted to subvert their creative age-peers through, "open aggression and hostility, criticism, rejection and/or indifference...". Torrance also observed the creative children's responses. They were listed in this order:

1) compliance
2) clowning and inconsistent performance
3) silence and apathy or preoccupation
4) solitary activity
5) counteraggressiveness
6) indomitable persistence and apparent ignorance of criticism

It is my thesis that these coping behaviors reflect an ascending degree of self-esteem: that is, children with tenuous esteem reduce or eliminate their efforts (compliance); those with more esteem perform inconsistently, and those few with sufficient self-esteem exhibit "indomitable persistence and apparent ignorance of criticism."

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Now consider psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy, which assumes fundamental needs such as safety and belonging must be satisfied before "higher level" needs such as achievement and self-actualization can be pursued:

The problem for the gifted in many schools is that ***Maslow becomes not a hierarchy, but a paradox***, or in the words of Gross (1989), self-actualization becomes a "forced-choice dilemma." Even if "lower" needs are met (and "belonging" may not be perceived as a "lower" need to the gifted child desperate for friends), an individual is then only *in a position to* pursue "higher" needs: tremendous effort and a vision uncompromised by a need to appease envious classmates is required to go about the often arduous task of creative productivity.

Needless to say, many of the gifted cave-in to the emotional extortion of the envious, which is why we are fast becoming a nation of underachievers.

The most vital strategy for individual students then, is to develop as much self-esteem as possible, to serve as an inoculation against peer pressure. If this is coupled with a strong belief in the value of achievement, chances are maximized toward achievement despite coercive measures designed to subvert such efforts.

At the school and district level, Herculean efforts must be initiated and sustained to accomplish the following relative to the gifted:

1) Elevate intellectual achievement to a level of acceptance and prestige equal (dare we say beyond?) that of athletics - an analogy that grew tiresome years ago, but which unfortunately still applies.

2) ***Name the issue for what it is***: enough of "equity vs. excellence," "ambivalence," and the other euphemisms; we are dealing with coercion, emotional extortion, and physical violence!

3) Demand, through the courts if necessary, mandation and funding for the gifted that is sufficient to meet their needs - which is nothing more than every other category of exceptionality receives.

4) Aggressively disseminate the emerging research that validates the benefits of ability grouping as well as the literature that outlines the most appropriate uses of educational initiatives such as cooperative education and outcome based education for the gifted.

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These measures should be combined with the excellent suggestions made by Singal in his article:

1) Dramatically increase the quality and quantity of assigned readings for students at all grade levels.

2) Bring back required survey courses as the staple of the high school humanities program.

3) Institute a flexible program of ability grouping at both the elementary and secondary school levels.

4) Attract more bright college students into the teaching profession (for the past decade, SAT scores of prospective teachers has hovered around 400).

Singal also bemoans the "dumbing down" of the curriculum, which he feels causes educators to be more concerned with not "stressing" students as opposed to "stretching" them as we once did. He states:

> All over the country, educators today typically judge themselves by how well they can reach the least-able student in the system, the slowest one in the class.
>
> The prevailing ideology holds that it is much better to give up the prospect of excellence than to take the chance of injuring any student's self-esteem. These attitudes have become so ingrained that in conversations with teachers and administrators one often senses a *virtual prejudice against bright students* (emphasis added).

The closing paragraph of this section of his excellent article states:

> Here it is necessary to be precise: the problem is not the pursuit of equality as such but *the bias against excellence that has accompanied it.* (emphasis added)

Surely one of the tragic ironies of all-time is that of the Black gangs described in Gregory's Time Magazine article. These children, ignorant of their own history, are unaware that their ancestors literally risked their lives to become literate; that achievement, especially academic achievement, was prized above virtually all else. To have these children carry coercive egalitarianism to the point of physical violence is a sad commentary about both the gangs and the often inhumane culture in which they live.

Finally, a last suggestion, which is at once probably the most urgent and the least likely to be enacted: conditions for these disadvantaged children simply *must* improve. This is necessary both for the disadvantaged and those they persecute. As Singal stated previously, "...the fact remains that most of them (i.e., the disadvantaged) will not make significant progress until they also have decent housing, a better diet, and a safer environment in which to live."

Until this happens - that is, until our society values all children and is willing to commit resources to help them excel, gifted advocates should consider themselves in a state of siege.

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